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FM AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES
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UNCLAS BUENOS AIRES 002123

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E.O. 12958: N/A
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PGOV, KPAO, SOCI, ECON, AR

SUBJECT: ARGENTINA: AMBASSADOR FOCUSES ON SOCIAL ISSUES IN TUCUMAN PROVINCE

REF: BUENOS AIRES 2095

Summary

¶1. (U) In an October 19 visit to Argentina's northwestern province of Tucuman, the Ambassador met with local members of the media. He toured an American-owned citrus company that has a progressive Corporate Social Responsibility project to educate off-season workers. The Ambassador was also a keynote speaker in the inauguration of an anti-trafficking in persons (TIP) foundation (reftel BA 2095). The Maria De Los Angeles Foundation was founded by anti - TIP crusader Susana Trimarco. The Ambassador discussed a variety of social programs addressing education and child mortality rates with Tucuman provincial governor, Governor Alperovich. At the local bi-national center, the Ambassador donated Digital Video Conference (DVC) equipment and hosted an energetic round-table discussion with local youth leaders. End Summary.

Meeting with Journalists

¶2. (U) The Ambassador invited three leading representatives of the local media for an off-the-record session: Carlos Abrehu and Federico Menamen, chief editors of the largest and most influential newspaper in the province, La Gaceta; and German Valdez, a radio/television host and former Embassy IV. The journalists welcomed the frank conversation, explaining it is not common for them to find important public figures willing to listen to them. The Ambassador told them meeting journalists is one of the activities he most enjoys while traveling in Argentina, as they are among the best-informed actors in society. La Gaceta is nearing its 100th anniversary and is one of few family-owned newspapers left in Argentina. It has a reputation of objectivity and high professional standards. It sells some 50,000 newspapers every day and over 65,000 over the weekend.

3.(U) The journalists outlined the main hurdles facing democratic institutions in the province, pointing mainly at the consequences of a steady process of social deterioration, which results in increasing crime and drug addiction among young people. Mr. Menamen recalled that when he would cover stories in low-income neighborhoods 20 years ago he could mingle with the local residents and even sip mate with them, while these days his reporters tell him they are scared to set foot there.

4.(U) The journalists, echoing their counterparts in every province the Ambassador has visited, mentioned the lack of a strong opposition both at the provincial and national level, as one of the main institutional weaknesses in Argentina. They also queried the Ambassador on the state of bilateral relations and the upcoming elections in the United States, saying they will be very interested in following the upcoming elections in the United States.

Citromax Lemons

15. (U) Citromax General Manager Lucas Fornaciari and his Assistant General Manager Fernando Carrera gave the Ambassador a tour of part of their production and processing facilities, including a lemon nursery and a lemon grove, and explained the achievements of Citromax's Corporate Social Responsibility Program. Citromax is an American company that has been based in Tucuman for 30 years. Argentina is the largest exporter of lemons in the world and Citromax is the third largest lemon farm in Argentina. It is also one of the region's leading employers. Citromax has an impressive corporate social program in which employees are able to receive medical care and occupational training during the off season. This plan was implemented with the cooperation of the provincial government and has been adopted by the National Labor Ministry as a pilot for a broader program. They also provide scholarships to keep children of employees in secondary school and have started a community scholarship program for employee dependents.

Meeting/Lunch with Governor Alperovich

16. (U) The Ambassador attended a lunch with Governor Alperovich, his wife (National Deputy Beatriz Rojkes de Alperovich), and members of his Cabinet. The Ambassador congratulated Governor Alperovich on his recent reelection, noting that the Governor had won with 78 percent of the vote. Alperovich suggested that his political success is due to the fact that he is a businessman, not a politician. He explained that his administration has worked to address security, education, and public health issues. He noted that his administration purged the provincial police force of 1,000 corrupt officials, and is increasing training in order to professionalize the force. For example, the province has recently established a special investigation unit for homicide and complex crime. Earlier in the year, the province created a special unit for the investigation of sex crimes and human trafficking, he added. He noted the problem of increased drug flow through Argentina, and expressed interest in working with the USG Northern Border Task Force aimed at enhancing U.S.-Argentine counter narcotics cooperation.

7.(U) Turning to education issues, Alperovich told the Ambassador that his administration has focused on increasing secondary school attendance, and that his second term will concentrate on improving the quality of education. In the first four years of his administration, over 1,500 new classrooms have been built and secondary school attendance rates increased 50-60 percent. In an effort to prevent truancy and delinquency, the Ministry of Education has also developed extra-curricular sports programs targeted at children from low-income households. The day before the Ambassador's visit, the provincial Ministry of Education signed an agreement with Intel to jointly train provincial teachers in how best to use Information and Communication Technologies to enhance classroom activity.

18. (U) National Deputy Rojkes de Alperovich, the wife of the governor, noted provincial successes on public health issues. At the height of Argentina's economic crisis in 2001, Tucuman had one of the highest infant mortality rates in Argentina, with 26 out of 1000 infants dying mostly from malnutrition. Tucuman's Ministry of Health developed a program to ensure that all women receive prenatal care from the moment they discover that they are pregnant. In addition, the province began an immunization program to inoculate all children under the age of five from a variety of diseases. As a result of the program, Tucuman now has one of the lowest infant mortality rates in Argentina, with 11 deaths per 1000. Once the children turn five, they enter the public school system, where they continue to get health and education benefits.

9.(U) Turning to the provincial economy, Governor Alperovich noted that the Inter-American Development Bank has allocated USD 5 million to build irrigation infrastructure in Tucuman. He explained that the province has 600,000 hectares of arable land, but that only 100,000 hectares have access to a reliable irrigation system. He indicated that the IDB project would increase the amount of land available for cultivation by 50 percent. Agriculture accounts for 75 percent of jobs in Tucuman's rural areas and the project will spur rural employment, he said.

Ambassador and Tucuman Youth Discuss Leadership

¶10. (U) ATICANA, one of the largest (1100 students) and oldest (established 1955) bi-national centers in Argentina, was the setting for an engaging session on leadership principles between the Ambassador and young leaders in Tucuman. The secondary and university-level group was composed of the winners of a national "Journalist for a Day" contest, participants of ATICANA's Youth "Transformational Leadership" program and English students. Former IV Ana Maria Ferullo opened with a briefing on the principles of the Transformational Leadership curriculum. The Ambassador and students then exchanged views on the distinction between authority and leadership and that both were needed to lead effectively. The young participants also expressed an interest in scholarships to study in the United States. During this session, the Ambassador also donated a digital video conference system to ATICANA. The event was well attended by local media and received a separate, favorable write-up in Tucuman's main paper, La Gaceta, the following morning, alongside coverage of the Ambassador's other activities. Separately, in a private meeting with the ATICANA Board, the Ambassador was briefed on the English teaching program, run by a staff of 30 people, and ATICANA's special visa support program.

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